Mercy Scholars Annual Address
President Tom Foley
Mount Aloysius College
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I just took a look at your program for today and realize—without any question—that I am the least anticipated entry on this four part agenda. It’s okay—I grew up in a family of twelve, and coming in fourth is actually making out pretty well. Seriously, let me get this straight—you get to eat, you get to watch videos of yourselves, you get to listen to funny little speeches about each other and you get to listen to the President. Hmmm. I am pretty clear where my priorities would be if I was on your side of this podium. But it’s all good.

Sister Helen Marie tells me that I have exactly 30 minutes, no more no less, in which to impart some annual wisdom to you all. Let me get started.

Last year, I talked to you about the possibility of good government, the notion that when government is done well, it can perform miracles—literally lift people out of poverty and pogrom. I chose that topic because I felt it so unfair that you have had to grow up in such a cynical age—not of your own making—where the punditry class a generation ahead of you has too often made a mockery of honest analysis of public policy. It is all partisan these days, or so it often seems.

In that talk, I offered ten examples of important American initiatives—from the Tennessee Valley Authority (which brought electricity to thousands of farmers) to the Social Security Act (which brought your great grandparents out of poverty). Five of those initiatives were drafted and passed by Republican Presidents and five by Democrats.

I offered those thoughts because I didn’t want our Mercy Presidential Scholars to ever be mistaken about two things—one, that government can be an engine for hope (just like your college); and two, that hope is not partisan—it has no Democratic or Republican parent or guardian or even recipient. A good idea is a good idea, whether someone in academia or from the government or the for-profit world conceives it.

Today, I want to capture your attention on a different subject, what we can call for our purposes today paradigm shifts. What is a paradigm shift? The phrase has its origins in the field of science, and refers to a “change in the basic assumptions” about a given scientific theory or fact. For our purposes, it represents some fundamental change, what one dictionary calls “a radical change in underlying beliefs or theory.” When Galileo submitted his proof that the earth was round, he caused a paradigm shift—he proposed a “radical change” in the long held “underlying belief” that the world was flat—the idea that if Columbus went on his expedition to the New World, his ships would fall right off the edge of a flat surface.
Well, you Mercy Presidential Scholars have already lived through so many paradigm shifts I can’t even count them. I want to mention three to you today.

First, there has been a paradigm shift in the very way that you see the world—a shift that is frankly way more complicated than Galileo’s mathematical proof for a round not flat earth. This shift is enabled by the tools that are available to you with which to formulate or understand the world that is revolving around you.

Here are a couple of quick and easy examples. First example, the nightly news. In my youth, news happened once a day for a half hour on one of three channels. For all of you, news is a 24/7 business with competing infotainment networks that literally never go off the air. Just look at this list of issues that today’s kids think about—largely driven by their incidental exposure to the news—that I can tell you were not a part of my daily concerns at their age. You get your news through a wide variety of information mediums, and in sound (and info) bits that make sound bites look small.

Second example, the sheer abundance of info is itself a paradigm shift. We are living in an age where the growth and availability of unique new info is exponential...happening so fast that it’s seems hard to catch your breath, if you spend just an hour delving into it.

- 4 exabytes...that’s 4 times 10 to the 19th power of unique, new information will be generated in the world this year—more information than was generated in the past fifty centuries put together!
- A week’s worth of news in the New York Times provides more information than a person in the 18th century was likely to come across in their lifetime.
- We are fast approaching a million words in the English language....that’s more than 5 times what Shakespeare had to work with.
- Today, our technology enables both old and new information to be communicated at warp speed. Think about this: When the radio was invented, it took 38 years to reach a market audience of 50 million people. It took Facebook two years.
- The number of text messages sent and received each day exceeds the population of the planet!
- The average 21 year old student at Mount Aloysius has sent or received 250,000 electronic messages—emails, texts, instagrmas, whatever.

In retrospect, the warehouse-sized computer that put a man on the moon had far less capacity than your iPhone; they are working right now on a super computer that will exceed the computational capabilities of the human brain. And by the midpoint of this century, they expect to have an affordable computer that can calculate faster than the computational capabilities of the entire human race—put together.

So, what does all this mean for us you?

Point here is a simple one—you are confronted with far more choices at far earlier ages than we were—simply because you have so much more information available to you from so many different mediums. It’s the abundance of choices before your value systems and characters are even remotely fully formed that is astounding.
One of my favorite resources is the Beloit College Mindset List, which reflects the worldview of first year college students. These slides show just a few of the “cultural touchstones” that mark the Class of 2015. The mindset is literally very different.

Let me come at it from another direction. Here is a list of things that your generation is determined never to pay for—if that doesn’t show a different and determined worldview, I’m not sure what does. These represent a paradigm shift in how we exchange value for services.

Finally, here is a picture of me thinking (or at least pretending to). Calming water, isolation, setting sun. Here is one of you, as represented by a young woman with seven different pieces of technology hooked up to her—while she is sleeping. She might argue this is helping her to sleep.

When Yeats, writing of the revolutionary Ireland of his time said that “the world has changed, changed utterly,” he meant over the course of a century—some would argue over eight centuries. Now it might be in the course of a single 24-hour news cycle.

The second paradigm shift does not have to do so much with info or the abundance of it, but how we communicate about it. In my day, communication was in person, one on one, and most likely verbal and vocal. Now, it is almost never in person, rarely one on one (more likely shared with many), and only very, very rarely verbal and vocal.

We live in an era when “MySpace” is already old space, where “email” is the new “snail mail,” where the first association with the word “web” is not “spider”, and where a foreign government—Egypt’s, entrenched for 40 years—was toppled a few summers ago by a thousand protesters armed with smart phones, Facebook accounts and a common cause. The keyboard—faster than the pen and still mightier than the sword. My goodness, if Facebook were a country, it would be the third largest country in the world.

These new forms of communication have allowed each of us to redefine ourselves in much more than simply a nationalistic sense. Bonds of friendship, commonality, and cause are forged, tested, and strengthened instantaneously across schools, communities, heck even across oceans and often without a single in-person encounter. And make no mistake, these developments in the technology of communications are like tectonic shifts under the very ground on which education rests—as NYU President John Sexton put it, “on the fields of knowledge creation and knowledge dissemination.”

In higher education today, we all come late to the party, trying to keep pace with developments we couldn’t even imagine—not just a generation ago—how about a year ago. I saw a video of a Good Samaritan somewhere in the Third World building a well by following the directions on his IPAD mounted on a dirt pile next to him. I saw a movie in Altoona where a teenager dialed up his blackberry to figure out how to pick a lock. The ripple effects of all these examples of “higher” education—how to peacefully overthrow a government, how to pick a lock, how to build a well—are not unrelated to what we do at Mount Aloysius every day and are directly related to what we must do to prepare you for when you leave us.

Let me show you a timeline—by centuries—of new communication tools. Notice how much shorter is the time frame for brand new developments in the last century or two.
Here is a timeline of how long it took for each new communication development to reach 50M users. Note the pattern—it took the Gutenberg printing press 500 years. It takes a new video from a favorite performer perhaps an hour.

Next is a clock that simply looks at what happens in terms of electronic communications every sixty seconds.

And don’t think all this data is just sitting out there—here is a chart on how often people check in with all this info through all these mediums.

Paradigm shift number two—the very nature of interpersonal communications has changed, perhaps irrevocably.

So far, I don’t think I have told you anything you didn’t already know—maybe not the same fancy charts but you know all this—I am just chronicling your lives, and those of our three sons. But the third paradigm shift is the real takeaway point here today, and it concerns the status of lifelong learning. Lifelong learning was a buzz phrase twenty-five years ago, when I ran a huge state agency called the Department of Labor and Industry—lifelong learning was something I talked about, but really just something to aspire towards. But it is no longer the prerogative of the educated few, lifelong learning is now the mandate for all who wish to get a better job, or just keep the one they have.

You know, over 60% of our students at Mount Aloysius are in nursing or allied health fields. I want to ask each of you to think about the last time you went to the hospital. Did you see anyone carrying a chart or putting one in a slot at the bottom of your bed? Probably not, because as soon as the doctor or the nurse or the surg tech or the medical assistant finished treating you, they turned around to a laptop device mounted on the wall in your room or the hallway, and recorded their comments through a software program that shared them hospital-wide and added them instantly to your permanent record. Welcome to the 21st century in the hospital and at Mount Aloysius. And that particular transition—from unreadable doctor prose to legible, transparent, instantly messengered diagnoses and treatment plans—happened in a snap of the fingers.

Did you know that the majority of the jobs that will be filled by today’s elementary school students don’t even exist today? How will those kids or our students prepare for such change? Whether they are going to work in a manufacturing plant like the McLanahan Corporation, take over as warden at the federal prison in Cresson, run a nursing division at UPMC Altoona, or serve as rehab specialist at the Hiram G. Andrews Center, our graduates will have to “know how to know,” as former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich puts it. We understand that their experience at Mount Aloysius must be the lynchpin for lifelong learning—so they can keep pace in their first professions, and prepare for whole new ones.

Let me show you a few slides here. First is a look at how I did research in my day—Periodical Guide to Literature, and maybe 20 sources like you see arrayed here. Here is how you do it—every one of those icons represents a whole different search engine, and there are perhaps hundreds of thousands of these out there right now. And this final slide shows all the social media sites where you can ask likeminded people, friends, experts or the random public where they will find the best data/info on any given topic. The point is not that you use them now, but that you will have to continue to use them in the future—and apply your critical thinking skills to zeroing in on the best, most cogent, concise summaries of the new info that you will be desperate to acquire.
Today, at Mount Aloysius, we can order up a syllabus from MIT or Misericordia simply by going online. And it’s free. It’s never been our way here at Mount Aloysius to have classes with even more than 30 students, and we average 14. But the days of Big State U and their 100-student classes, and droning lectures in halls with 300 pre-med majors are over. At Mount Aloysius, we already offer hybrid classes where students can pause, fast forward or even re-watch parts of lectures on our “smart boards” and we are already teaching continuing education classes where you can interact at the speed of twitter with 10 other students—everyone can comment and see each other’s comments much faster than if they were taking turns speaking out loud. Our son Matt’s MBA class here engaged in a semester-long project with a group of architects in Quito, Ecuador—through the magic of Skype.

Are we up to the technology challenge at Mount Aloysius? You bet we are. We have more simulation labs and more high tech robot-ikins than any nursing school from State College all the way to Pittsburgh. 80% of all our classrooms are wired with the latest smart technology. YouTube is already old hat at Mount Aloysius, where word-heavy public reports are quickly converted into readable on-line magazines, complete with shimmering visuals, feedback functions and handy links for “deep divers.” Last fall, we christened a new Technology Council whose mission is to keep us on top of all the implications of these new technologies for pedagogy, for internal and external communications, for recruitment and for advancement strategies. And we opened our own Social Media Lab in the basement of a 110 year old building three years ago—we call it the “Digital Grotto” (I love the double irony here)—so that our students and our faculty have the newest education tools on the market.

So I think we are up to the challenge. My closing question today is, “Are you?” You will need to be lifelong learners when you leave here.

At Mount Aloysius, we have long produced graduates who are both job-ready and community-ready. Now, you need to be technology-ready as well—to be as fluent in the new technologies of communications and education as you are in community service and service learning, in physical therapy and secondary education, in biology and criminology, in radiation science and political science. Those new tools are the key to your lifelong learning.

So now we are adding a third leg to what I call the Mount Aloysius Compact. We work to produce graduates who are not just job-ready, not just prepared to engage in community, but we will produce graduates who are technology-ready as well, because that is the only way to fulfill the promise behind the founding of this institution—to respond to the needs of the people and of the region. The Mount Aloysius Compact—job-ready, community-ready and technology-ready.

Let me finish with a story about a postal worker. A postal worker comes across a letter that is addressed to God. He was fairly used to getting letters addressed to Santa Claus but this is the first one he’d ever had one addressed “To God.” He decided to open it and found the following “Dear God, as you know this has been a particular tough year and we are not able to get any gifts for our son Jimmy. If you could see your way to sending us ten dollars that should be more than enough to ensure a happy Christmas for Jimmy. Thank you.” And it was signed.

The postman was so moved by this letter that he took out another envelope and wrote “From God” on it and took all the money that he had in his wallet—which was six dollars—and put it in the envelope and stuck it in the mailbox.
You can imagine the next day how excited he was to see if there would be any response. He opened the box and sure enough there was a letter to God and in the letter it said “Dear God, thank you so much for listening to our plea and reaching out to help us. Though I know I asked for ten dollars I want you to know there was only six in the envelope. And I know exactly where the other four dollars went, those SOB’s at the Post Office.”

Well I know that’s how it is sometimes in your life. No matter how much good work you do there’s always some guy (your College President) telling you that you are going to need to do more—as in, “you need to become a lifelong learner!!!”

I thank you for your example as Mercy Presidential Scholars. I am a strong believer in the adage that “a school building is just four walls with tomorrow inside.” And when you have those “postal worker” days, I hope that the inspiration of that adage stays with you. You really do have “tomorrow inside” these school buildings we call Mount Aloysius, but it is also inside each one of you.

I thank you for your attention to these remarks today. Now, let’s have some fun!!